

## ❧VIII❧

# Of Those Who Have Attained a Principality through Crimes

But, because one becomes prince from private individual also by two modes which cannot be altogether attributed either to fortune or to virtue, I do not think they should be left out, although one of them can be reasoned about more amply where republics are treated.<sup>1</sup> These are when one ascends to a principality by some criminal and nefarious path or when a private citizen becomes prince of his fatherland by the support of his fellow citizens. And, to speak of the first mode, it will be shown with two examples, one ancient, the other modern, without entering otherwise into the merits of this issue, because I judge it sufficient, for whoever would find it necessary, to imitate them.

Agathocles the Sicilian<sup>2</sup> became king of Syracuse not only from private fortune but from a mean and abject one. Born of a potter, he always kept to a life of crime at every rank of his career; nonetheless, his crimes were accompanied with such virtue of spirit and body that when he turned to the military, he rose through its ranks to become praetor of Syracuse. After he was established in that rank, he decided to become prince and to hold with violence and without obligation to anyone else that which had been conceded to him by agreement. Having given intelligence of his plan to Hamilcar the Carthaginian, who was with his armies fighting in Sicily, one morning he assembled the people and Senate of Syracuse as if he had to decide things pertinent to the republic. At a signal he had ordered, he had all the senators and the richest of the people killed by his

1. See *Discourses on Livy*; note that NM does not say which of the two modes is reasoned about more amply “where republics are treated.”

2. Agathocles lived from 361 to 289 B.C.; his tyranny began in 316.



soldiers. Once they were dead, he seized and held the principate<sup>3</sup> of that city without any civil controversy. And although he was defeated twice by the Carthaginians and in the end besieged, not only was he able to defend his city but also, leaving part of his men for defense against the siege, he attacked Africa with the others. In a short time he freed Syracuse from the siege and brought the Carthaginians to dire necessity; they were compelled of necessity to come to an agreement with him, to be content with the possession of Africa, and to leave Sicily to Agathocles. Thus, whoever might consider the actions and virtue of this man will see nothing or little that can be attributed to fortune. For as was said above, not through anyone's support but through the ranks of the military, which he had gained for himself with a thousand hardships and dangers, he came to the principate and afterwards he maintained it with many spirited and dangerous policies. Yet one cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory. For, if one considers the virtue of Agathocles in entering into and escaping from dangers, and the greatness of his spirit in enduring and overcoming adversities, one does not see why he has to be judged inferior to any most excellent captain. Nonetheless, his savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes, do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men. Thus, one cannot attribute to fortune or to virtue what he achieved without either.

In our times, during the reign of Alexander VI, Oliverotto da Fermo,<sup>4</sup> having been left a fatherless child some years before, was brought up by a maternal uncle of his

3. Or principality; *principato* can mean the ruling or dominating office as well as the realm of domination.

4. Oliverotto Euffreducci da Fermo, who took power in Fermo on December 26, 1501, and a year later was strangled by order of Cesare Borgia at Sinigaglia.



called Giovanni Fogliani, and in the first years of his youth he was sent out to soldier under Paolo Vitelli<sup>5</sup> so that when he was versed in that discipline, he would attain an excellent rank in the military. Then when Paolo died, he fought under Vitellozzo, his brother, and in a very short time, since he was ingenious and dashing in person and spirit, he became the first man in his military. But as it appeared to him servile to be at the level of others, he thought that with the aid of certain citizens of Fermo to whom servitude was dearer than the liberty of their fatherland, and with support from the Vitelli, he would seize Fermo. And he wrote to Giovanni Fogliani that since he had been away from home a few years, he wanted to come to see him and his city, and in some part to acknowledge his patrimony; and because he had not troubled himself for anything but to acquire honor, he wanted to come in honorable fashion accompanied by a hundred horsemen of his friends and servants, so that his citizens might see that he had not spend the time in vain. He begged Giovanni to please order that he be received honorably by the inhabitants of Fermo, which would direct honor not only to him but to Giovanni himself, since Liverotto was his ward. Thereupon Giovanni did not fail in any proper duty to his nephew; and when Liverotto had been honorably received by the inhabitants of Fermo, he was lodged in Giovanni's house. There, after a few days had passed, and after he had waited to order secretly what was necessary for his future crime, he held a most solemn banquet to which he invited Giovanni Fogliani and all the first men of Fermo. And when the food and all other entertainments customary at such banquets had been enjoyed, Liverotto, with cunning,<sup>6</sup> opened certain grave discussions,<sup>7</sup> speaking of the

5. A famous condottiere, he was hired by the Florentines and then beheaded by them in 1499 for suspected treachery.

6. lit.: art.

7. lit.: reasonings.



greatness of Pope Alexander and of Cesare Borgia, his son, and of their undertakings. While Giovanni and the others were responding to these discussions, Liverotto at a stroke stood up, saying that these were things that should be spoken of in a more secret place; and he withdrew to a room into which Giovanni and all the other citizens came behind him. No sooner were they seated than soldiers came out of secret places and killed Giovanni and all the others. After this homicide, Liverotto mounted on horse, rode through the town and besieged the highest magistracy in the palace so that through fear they were compelled to obey him and to establish a government of which he was made prince. And since all those who could have hurt<sup>8</sup> him because they were malcontent were dead, he strengthened himself with new civil and military orders, so that in the period of one year that he held the principality, he was not only secure in the city of Fermo but had become fearsome to all his neighbors. And to overthrow him would have been as difficult as to overthrow Agathocles if he had not permitted himself to be deceived by Cesare Borgia when at Sinigaglia, as was said above, he took the Orsini and the Vitelli. There Liverotto too was taken, one year after the parricide he committed, and together with Vitellozzo, who had been his master in his virtues and crimes, he was strangled.

Someone could question how it happened that Agathocles and anyone like him, after infinite betrayals and cruelties, could live for a long time secure in his fatherland, defend himself against external enemies, and never be conspired against by his citizens, inasmuch as many others have not been able to maintain their states through cruelty even in peaceful times, not to mention uncertain times of war. I believe that this comes from cruelties badly used or well used. Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of the

8. lit.: offended.



necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated. Those who observe the first mode can have some remedy for their state with God and with men, as had Agathocles; as for the others it is impossible for them to maintain themselves.

Hence it should be noted that in taking hold of a state, he who seizes it should review all the offenses necessary for him to commit, and do them all at a stroke, so as not to have to renew them every day and, by not renewing them, to secure men and gain them to himself with benefits. Whoever does otherwise, either through timidity or through bad counsel, is always under necessity to hold a knife in his hand; nor can one ever found himself on his subjects if, because of fresh and continued injuries, they cannot be secure against him. For injuries must be done all together, so that, being tasted less, they offend less; and benefits should be done little by little so that they may be tasted better.<sup>9</sup> And above all, a prince should live with his subjects so that no single accident whether bad or good has to make him change; for when necessities come in adverse times you will not be in time for evil, and the good that you do does not help you, because it is judged to be forced on you, and cannot bring you any gratitude.

9. See *Discourses on Livy* I 45.